

CHAMPION HOUSE
1357 Mowry Avenue
Fremont
Alameda County
California 94536

HABS No. CA-2288

HABS
CAL,
1-FREMO,
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service, Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CHAMPION HOUSE

HABS No. CA-2288

Location: 1357 Mowry Avenue
Fremont
Alameda County
California 94536

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1-FREMO.
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U.S.G.S. Niles Quadrangle
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
10.590320.4157450

Present Owner: Raymond R. Rybak
1357 Mowry Avenue
Fremont, California

Present Occupant: Raymond R. Rybak

Present Use: Office

Significance: The Champion House is historically significant as one of the few remnants of a farm complex in southern Alameda County. The property is associated with a family prominent in the area's settlement and early agricultural development. Architecturally, the house and barn are representative of regional types which are rapidly disappearing.

PART I DESCRIPTION

A. Site:

The Champion House is situated on a nearly rectangular, 0.68-acre parcel on the west side of Mowry Avenue in the city of Fremont, Washington Township, California. The house is set back from the street at the northern edge of the parcel; the barn is at the western, rear edge of the parcel. The street frontage of the property contains a circular driveway in front of the house, flanked by a parking lot to the south. The remainder of the site is planted in grass, with a handful of mature shade and fruit trees. A chain-link fence runs along the property's perimeter on the north, south and west. Recent development encompasses the site, including a water pumping station adjoining on the south, a residential facility for the disabled adjoining on the west and north, and an apartment complex on the east, across Mowry Avenue.

B. House

The Champion House is a one-and-one-half story wood-frame structure. The original house was rectangular in plan, measuring approximately 27' wide by 36' long. Additions have extended the building at its northeast front and northwest rear corners, resulting in the existing irregular plan. The roof of the original house is a gable with moderate pitch which steps down at the front to a central, subsidiary gable flanked by hips. The one-story front addition has a gable roof with similar pitch. The rear addition consists of a one-and-one-half story section extending to the north with a gable roof of similar pitch, and a one-story section projecting to the west with a low-pitched gable roof. The foundation of the original house and front addition consists of concrete footings, while that of the rear addition is concrete block. Exterior walls are clad uniformly in horizontal channel-rustic wood siding, 8-1/2" wide. The wood-sash, double-hung windows of the original house include several types: two-over-two (south side); one-over-one (north side); and six-over-six (rear). The one-over-one windows of the front elevation are adorned with 5" borders of stained glass in the upper lights, consisting of small panes of blue, purple, yellow and pink glass. The front addition, comprised primarily of a slant-sided bay window projecting forward, incorporates one-over-one double-hung windows with identical stained-glass highlights. Exterior ornament is limited to the front gable of the original house and to the bay-window addition. The gable is embellished with a bargeboard and brace; the latter is adorned with a routed and incised triangular panel. The bay window addition has a bargeboard, jigsawed and incised brackets, and built-up paneling embossed with bull's-eyes and strip molding. A central transomed entry with four-paneled wood door flanks the bay window.

Exterior alterations not already mentioned include a lattice screen applied around the base of the house; aluminum windows in the rear addition and at the upper level of the rear of the original house; and a deck at the rear, southwest corner of the house, incorporating stairs to a partial basement with concrete-block walls.

The interior retains little of its original feeling. The front entry opens into a small hall with a pine floor. Directly ahead is the original staircase, with newel post and lathed balusters. The original parlor, enlarged by the front addition, is to the right of the entry. Window and doorway surrounds in this room retain bull's-eye blocks. Some doors are four-paneled with porcelain knobs. A 6'-wide opening on the rear wall of the front parlor retains a pair of four-panel sliding doors. Walls have been replastered and floors carpeted. The ground-floor ceiling height is 9'10". The upper story contains four bedrooms opening off a central hall. All have sloping ceilings. The house is presently used as an office and most rooms are unused. It is in excellent condition.

C. Barn

The barn is a wood-frame, rectangular structure, approximately 28' wide by 45' long. It is a full two stories in height, with a gable roof. The long sides and the rear are sheathed in vertical redwood boards 11-1/2" wide. The roof is clad in wood shingles with an overlay of composition shingles. Each long side contains a 4' doorway near the rear. The rear has a central opening 7'6" wide with a door suspended by rollers from an exterior metal track. This opening is surmounted by a louvered wood vent. The symmetrical front elevation, facing east to the house and road, is treated elaborately. It is clad in 8-1/2" channel-rustic siding, applied horizontally. A central doorway, measuring 9' by 9', is flanked by windows and surmounted by a loft opening, also flanked by windows and surmounted in turn by a louvered wood vent. The ground-level and loft doors, suspended by rollers from interior metal tracks, are constructed of 3-1/2" vertical tongue-and-groove siding and embellished with chamfered bracing. The sills and cornices of windows, loft opening and vent are subtly detailed with beveled edges.

The interior contains large, open spaces at both levels. The flooring of the ground level consists of a double layer of 1x6 planks laid on earth. A pair of hay chutes, troughs and stalls with built-up floors are at the northwest rear corner. A narrow stairway at the southeast front corner leads to the loft. A small stair landing has plank doors imprinted with the name, "W.H. Champion." The interior reveals the barn's structural system. 2x4 studs, 2' on center, rise from mud sills. Two posts at the center, with diagonal braces, support a central longitudinal beam. 2x12 joists, 2' on center, support the upper floor. 2x4 rafters, 3' on center and tied by braces, form the roof. The barn is essentially unaltered but in extremely poor condition. It appears to be structurally unsound. The roof is breached in several places, and the loft floor is unstable.

PART II HISTORY

A. Physical History:

The dates of construction of the Champion House have not been documented. According to family recollections, Marcia Jane Nichols married Woodard H. Champion in 1875, and the house was a wedding present from Joseph Nichols to his daughter and son-in-law (Cartier and Laffey, 1987). The house has a probable date of construction of ca. 1880, based on an assessment of its original appearance. In 1889, Marcia Jane and her husband were granted a life estate to the original 8.15-acre site of the house (Cartier and Laffey, 1987). It seems likely that the front bay addition was built at this time; stylistically, it dates from ca. 1890. The barn could have been built any time between the initial construction of the house and the addition, or after. However, the use of channel-rustic siding

on its facade, and such details as the chamfered door braces, suggest an earlier, rather than a later date of construction.

The Champions continued to reside and farm here until the 1920s. The property included a number of outbuildings (forge, chicken sheds, water tower, laborers' cottages). Woodard Champion died in 1922, his wife in 1927. The property was purchased by Jennie Champion Ralph, a relative, in 1927. She made the farm her home until her death in 1966, by which time all the buildings except the house and barn had been demolished. Following her death, the land was subdivided and sold, leaving the remnant of the farm complex (house and barn) on the existing 0.68-acre parcel. (Cartier and Laffey, 1987). The subsequent owner, a doctor with a large family, altered the house considerably; a new kitchen, family room, bedroom, deck and partial basement were added, and the interior of the original house largely remodeled (Rybak, 1989). No significant additions or alterations have occurred since that time. (It is not known when the front porch was removed.)

B. Historical Context:

Agriculture in northern California had its beginnings in the area encompassed by the modern city of Fremont. Mission San Jose, founded in 1797, had developed extensive gardens, orchards, vineyards, olive groves, wheat fields, and a water-powered grist mill prior to the secularization of its lands in 1834 (Hendricks, p. 16). Early settlers in the 1850s concentrated on the cultivation of grain and vegetables; some, like John Horner--a Mormon immigrant who had arrived in California in 1846--accumulated vast landholdings and networks of farms. Grain production remained dominant in northern California through the 1870s. The 1880s saw the widespread transition to fruit growing, beginning for the most part in Santa Clara County and spreading north into Alameda County. (Scott, p. 79). The Niles area was a forerunner of this trend, due in large part to the pioneering efforts of James Shinn, who established a fruit nursery in that vicinity in 1871 (Hendricks, pp.26-27). Niles would remain a fruit-growing center with important nurseries through at least the 1920s (Sandoval, p. 181). By World War I, a general shift occurred to vegetable production; the Niles-Centerville area, however remained known for its fruits.

The long and distinguished agricultural tradition in southern Alameda County has come to an end only with the onset of urbanization since the 1950s. As late as 1950, Washington Township had a population of only 20,000. When the city of Fremont was incorporated in January 1956, its boundaries encompassed most of Washington Township and five of its historic communities--Niles, Centerville, Irvington, Mission San Jose, and Warm Springs--and had a total population of about 22,400. The opening of the East Shore (later, Nimitz) Freeway south to Fremont in 1957 spurred tremendous population growth. The number of residents nearly doubled by 1960, and topped 100,000 by 1970. Fremont's estimated population in

January 1988 was 165,200. This accelerating urbanization, primarily in the form of suburban housing developments, has transformed the area's traditional landscape and replaced most of its historic farm complexes. This is why the history and architecture of the Champion House are of such importance.

In July 1846, English-born Joseph Nichols and his wife Jerusha arrived in San Francisco aboard the schooner Brooklyn, two of 238 Mormon immigrants hoping to settle in California (Bancroft, p.261). By 1850 or 1851, they had settled on rich farmland near Alameda Creek, not far from the hamlet of Vallejo Mills, later renamed Niles (Thompson & West, p.170; Wood, p. 818). Two of their children were named in the first school census taken in the area, in October 1852. (Country Club, p.188). In Thompson & West's 1878 atlas of Alameda County, Nichols is listed as a farmer owning 85 acres of land in the vicinity of present-day Mowry Avenue and Peralta Blvd. He is described as one of the pioneer fruit growers in Washington Township: "There are a score of men in the township largely engaged in raising fruit and almonds. Take the road leading from Centreville to Niles, and we find James Shinn, Joseph Nichols, [etc.]...." (Thompson and West, p. 27, pp. 40-41). His largest tract, comprising 61.44 acres running back from today's Peralta Blvd. to Alameda Creek, adjoined the nursery of James Shinn, one of the county's foremost horticulturists and fruit growers (Sandoval, p.135; Hendricks, pp. 26-27). Nichols achieved a modest fame by developing the "Nichols cling-stone" peach, a favored variety of the period. The remainder of his land was in two parcels straddling Mowry Avenue, including the site of the Champion House.

Joseph and Jerusha Nichols had five children: Martin, Enos, Joseph A., Charles, and Marcia Jane (Cartier and Laffey, 1987). Following Nichols' death in the 1880s, his estate was divided up among his widow and his five children. It seems that each child received 8.15 acres. At least one son--Joseph A. Nichols--continued as a successful fruit grower on a portion of the original 61.44-acre ranch, where, after 1891, he cultivated peaches, apricots, plums, pears, apples, prunes, lemons, oranges, gooseberries and currants (Oakland Tribune, p.131). His sole daughter, Marcia Jane, and her husband, Woodard H. Champion, received 8.15 acres on the west side of present-day Mowry Avenue, apparently after having already lived there since about 1880 in a house given them by her father. The Champions continued to live there and farm the land until their deaths in the 1920s (Cartier and Laffey). The property remained intact under family ownership through the 1960s, when it was finally broken up into smaller parcels and sold.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original Architectural Drawings: None.
- B. Early Views: Photograph, ca.1880s, depicting east (front) elevation of house with full porch, prior to addition of bay window; elevated water tank to south, picket fence in front. Private collection.

D. Bibliography

1. Primary and unpublished sources

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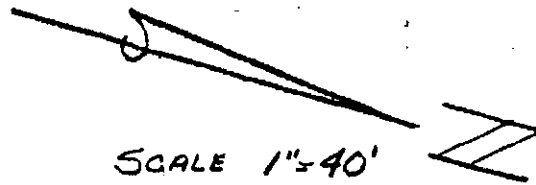
3. Interviews

Raymond R. Ryback, September/October 1989.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This Historic American Buildings Survey documentation of the Champion House was undertaken in compliance with a Memorandum of Agreement between the Federal Highway Administration and the California State Historic Preservation Officer. The contract work for the project was performed by Page & Turnbull, Inc., 364 Bush Street, San Francisco, Ca 94104; project manager was Jack Schafer.

Prepared by: Woodruff C. Minor
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Affiliation: Page & Turnbull, Inc.
Date: October 1989



SKETCH PLAN

CHAMPION HOUSE AND BARN
October 1989

